Strays

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I've only been thinking of writing 'Strays' for a few months, much less time than most of my stories. I'm not sure why this one took so little time, but I hope it is enjoyable anyway. I've been engaging with a lot of this genre of horror lately, and it has charmed me. The quiet, the mundane, the horror sandwiched between everyday life. Unlike 'Plenty' I don't have a specific music recommendation for this one, but maybe just turn on your radio and imagine whatever it is to be playing over the loudspeaker in the gas station.

I tend to collect strays. It happens, in a place like this. I feed the stray cats

and dogs on purpose, and the possums and raccoons on accident. I feed the stray kids and crackheads on purpose too, but normally they gotta pay for their food.
I think I first noticed him in early February, when the meager tourism in town is at its lowest. I didn't recognize him as a local, but being next to the highway that was normal. He was short, stubbly, and had a mop of ratty, greasy blond hair. I remember, one night right at 4 or 5 I was sweeping, preparing to give the gas station over to the next shift, when he wandered into the light of the pumps like a junebug to a headlight.

It was like the darkness followed him. Like he stepped out of a thick darkness the way you step out of artificial smoke from a smoke machine. I had thought I heard something knock over a trash can and scurry off earlier, and the whole place had felt.. watched, that night. Then, the doorbell tinkled and in stepped big-eyes McGee. I mistook him for a highschooler at first, then a crackhead, but both I was used to, so I ignored it and went back to helping myself to a reward snickers for doing such a great job sweeping. I noticed he smelled funny. "Funny" here meaning he didn't smell like B.O. and cigarettes, which everyone dressed the way he was in decrepit work clothes had the right to smell. It was faint but he smelled like.. coconuts, or some other cheap shampoo, with something sour underneath like stagnant water. I remember he said, "HI." In a neutral voice about 2 minutes after he entered, and after he'd walked to the far side to look in the drink cooler. His voice rang no alarm bells, he sounded human and sober. He brought a handful of random shit to the counter, paid in exact change, made the kind of eye contact autistic kids think they're supposed to make, and smiled and said thank you and goodnight when he left. And if I'm honest, absolutely none of it phased me in any way. This guy was weird, but most people were weird. Most people I saw in a night were weirder. In fact I probably wouldn't have remembered him at all if he hadn't of pushed open the fucking pull door. I was SURE it was supposed to be a pull door, because it SAID push by mistake and we always fell for it, even though our boss started putting sticky notes on the door to remind us.

And so began my relationship with "Sammy". Because the next time he came in, he volunteered that information, that his name was Sammy. I tried to ignore the fact that he was buying Sam Adams beer and his ID said "Sam Adams", and told him truthfully that my name was Tanner.

Most of me wants to get a new job, part of me is too lazy and knows I don't need more money, and a tiny little part of me loves working exactly where I work. JJ's snack mart is in a little tourist trap town in North Carolina, about an hour away from Gatlinburg. As previously stated it's by a highway. So while Brett the dayshifter flirts with young Dolly Partons on vacation every day, I get to see stuff that would make Appalachian haunted tik tok kids shit themselves. And there's no monster in Appalachia that you can't either avoid, ward off, or take some birdshot to, it's really the human weirdos that are the problem. And the boss knows I love scrapping with weirdos. So she puts me on graveyard. Some people would hate this life. Maybe I do. But there's always weekends and the lake and catching up with my niece. I'm content.

Sammy starts coming in once or twice a week. His grocery list is totally random at first, but a few weeks in it starts getting more consistent. He likes snapple, cigarettes, cashews, and whatever magazine is in the rack. One time we had some roses for sale (don't even ask), and he bought one. I wasn't surprised when he walked outside and immediately ate it. Now, from how I'm telling it you might think Sammy's just a bit of an odd person. I tried to write it off as that for as

long as I could, give him the benefit of the doubt.
But I couldn't. He had too many teeth. His eyes glinted when the light hit them, the color of gator eyes. He walked like half of his body was a bag of sand and the other half a paper lantern. And there was something about the studs in his ears and the dirt ground into his nail beds, it was like they were connected in 4d, like they were on the same plane just in a way humans couldn't see. I could always tell he was studying me. He watched me keenly. All this to say nothing of the other shit like the push door. It seemed like if Sammy forgot a law of physics existed, he could break it. Like he was an actor who occasionally held his prop coffee cup upside down but then pretended to drink from it in the same breath, except for Sammy, the coffee would actually stay inside. Like how little kids pretend to steer cars by spinning the wheel back and forth and back and forth. I can't tell you how many times I caught him casually levitating a dropped item back into his hand, or his booted foot passing straight through a shelf corner. Oh, and the bugs. The station was infested with roaches and ants, always has been, always will be. When Sammy walked in a few would skitter up to him and crawl up his pant leg. I didn't care. Because Sammy was the nicest regular I'd ever had. He said thank you. He was never in a rush. After the night we exchanged names, he always said "Hello, Tanner." As he came in. Despite never mentioning a word about himself other than to say he was "new here", he seemed interested in my banal life, in the dive bar gossip and who was running for mayor (and why Geoff would probably be elected for the eight time). I laughed with this guy, successfully ignoring that he laughed like a cartoon character. By the time summer rolled around, I would pretty easily call Sammy a buddy of mine. If I'd ever seen the guy at a time that wasn't bumfuck midnight I would've invited him to the bar, maybe to the lake.

There was a particular night in August, the very worst and hottest part of the year when it was still 80 degrees at 3 am. I was on my phone, hiding in the corner where the camera couldn't see me. As usual. If my boss saw me on the cameras in the morning she'd tell me to clean instead, but she nor anyone else at the station cared to actually keep it clean, so neither did I. In fact, I was the only one who seemed to care or even notice that the place could (should?) be so much cleaner. But none of my coworkers felt like or maybe knew how to clean it better, and I wasn't their dad, so I didn't bother.
There was a "concert" at the bar that night, some band from whichever other small town playing classic rock, and honestly it was just cool enough that I wish I'd gone. The bar hadn't been hosting bands long, maybe a month? But it was certainly helping the nightlife, which had gone from "nonexistent" to "boring".

I was probably looking at something I shouldn't. The band quit playing at 1 and the bar closed at 2, so by 3 people were wandering through the gas station shop looking for snacks or stomach medicine. Some pretty girls wandered through, I asked for one's number and she thought it was funny and gave me her snapchat instead. Whatever, the night was already better than any this week. I didn't notice until later that Sammy had come in with the crowd. He bought his usual, but seemed to be drunk and in a good mood, so he sat outside and read his magazine. I'm supposed to report people who do that. I never do.

But then some guy came in. I don't know what his problem was, but he was desperate and he had a gun. He wanted the money in the cash register and a pack of cigarettes, and I was in the process of giving it to him. I still don't care. Corporate would expect me to put my life on the line for the maybe $50 in the box, but neither I nor my boss wanted that. I won't pretend that I'm so unshakeable that a glock

pointed at me didn't rattle me, but I also wasn't going to be a hero so I didn't think anything would actually happen. I would call the police after he was gone, give details, and they'd probably get him. Or they wouldn't.

Sammy started staring at the guy through the glass, peaking around an ad. That's when I honestly started to get scared. I didn't know what either was going to do, and something in the pit of my stomach didn't think I was going to see the next morning.

Sammy got off his box and walked back inside.

The guy sized him up and told him to turn around. Sammy didn't say anything. Then he asked if the guy was going to use the gun. The guy said he would if he had to.

I want to say I'm making the next part up. I want to. But I've seen the security tapes and so has my boss. Sammy didn't say anything, but the guy yelped and dropped the gun. It hit the floor and went off, I ducked. By the time I stood back up, the gun was a puddle of molten metal on the floor and the guy was staring in horror at his hands. It took me a long moment to figure out what the fuck was wrong with them and it hit me like a train that they were identical. He had two left hands. And maybe he'd been born a medical marvel but he sure wasn't acting like it. He tried to flex his former right hand, screamed, threw up, and I almost did too, because it moved like a dying spider. Sammy put his head on one side. Then, the guy was gone. He didn't leave, he was just gone.

I looked at Sammy. Then I asked him if he did that. Sammy grinned, and I'll never forget that grin, those grimy teeth sharp as needles. I asked Sammy where the guy was now. Sammy said area 51. That's where y'all keep your anomalies, right? he said. I breathed a huge sigh that turned into a chuckle, walked around the counter, grabbed a sixpack, and put my arm around Sammy's shoulder. We walked outside, sat down, and laughed our asses off. I handed Sammy a beer, and told him thank you, and good use of 'y'all', his slang was getting better. He smiled again, and said, "Thanks... friend." We got piss drunk, talked about random shit, and eventually I got up and cleaned up the shop. By the time the next shift arrived, Sammy was gone. I got in some trouble, but the boss can't get anyone to cover my shift and she saw the tapes anyway, so she let me off with a warning.

I've seen him many times since, and most recently, he came in with another thing like him. She wore head-to-toe denim, her skirt was obviously hiding bug legs, and she called herself "Debbie" as she passed an oatmeal cream pie across the counter. He said she was his sister, after I reminded him what the word meant.

I still don't care what exactly Sammy is. I think there's words to describe him somewhere, maybe in the little witchy shop across from the bar (bless their hearts, I don't know how they're still open, but I take my niece in there to try and keep them afloat), or maybe on the tik tok they'd call him a skin-walker (bullshit, and I don't think I need to explain why). I've never been into this kind of thing. The only horror I like is slasher, I only know Lovecraft exists because of my niece. But from what she told me, this type of creature normally isn't interested in being friends. So I feel awful special that Sammy wants to be friends with me.

Summary: A worker at an all-night gas station and convenience store recounts what he remembers of one particular regular; an unsettling young man who seems to be only pretending to be human.
Trigger warnings: gun violence, unsettling imagery, body horror, insects, emetophobia, drugs mentioned, alcohol
Tags: Appalachian horror, eldritch, southern gothic, friendship